

1 Thessalonians 1

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Date: 01 April 2012

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[0 : 00] This greeting at the beginning from Paul, Silvanus, or Silas, and Timothy, to the Church of the Thessalonians, and God the Father, and the Lord Jesus Christ, grace to you and peace.

We give thanks to God always for all of you, constantly mentioning you in our prayers, remembering before our God and Father your work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ. For we know, brothers, loved by God, that he has chosen you, because our gospel came to you not only in word, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction. God willing, in the next few weeks, I'd like to go through this epistle very, very, very briefly. And these things are often in your mind, you're often wondering what you're going to preach on, and it just seems to be something which was being brought before my mind, and indeed everything that came my way seemed to be wrapped up in this particular letter. Now, this city in Paul's day was a really vibrant city, and it was pivotal, really, to world trade, because it was a big harbor city, and it was kind of a direct link between the east and the west. It was on the route to the orient, and it was the kind of city that was flooded with goods going east and going west, so that it was this link between east and west. Indeed, it was the kind of city, it was reckoned, that whatever you wanted to get, whatever you were looking for, if you couldn't find it in

Thessalonica, it would be hard to find anywhere else, because it was this city of trade where there was this meeting, as it were, between east and west. It was a very prominent city. In fact, in ancient times, it hosted, like London's going to in this year, it hosted the Olympic Games, so it was a very prominent city way back in these days. Today, it's one of these cities that has survived. Today, it's Thessalonica up in northeast Greece, and it's the second, I think, the second largest city after Athens. So, it's still, it's one of these places that has survived from New Testament times.

But if you were to turn the clock back 2,000 years, we find that Paul arrives in this city with the gospel. And as we see, it was a very mixed reception. On the one hand, there was great encouragement, but on the other hand, there was persecution, there were difficulties, and at the end of the day, Paul had to leave that city. And it's very interesting the way that God works, because if we had a time to read, and we read in Acts chapter 17 there, but if we had read in the previous chapter, in chapter 16, that brings us where Paul has this Macedonian call, Acts 16 and verse 6.

[3 : 27] Paul was intending to go in another direction. Well, it's actually in verse 10 where he had this, where he received this vision. And when Paul had seen the vision, Paul had this vision, a vision appeared to Paul in the night, a man of Macedonia standing there urging him and saying, come over to Macedonia and help us. Now, Paul hadn't intended going in that direction, but it was very obvious from what Paul saw this vision, which he saw at night, whether it was in a dream or not, or what, more than likely it was a dream, but it was so real, it was so powerful that he believed that God was directing him in a particular direction. I suppose we have to ask ourselves the question, does God still direct us in dreams? Well, I would say that the most important thing that we've always got to establish is that God chiefly, primarily, the way that he directs us is in his word. We're told very clearly that the word of God is the rule, the only rule to direct us, how we may glorify and enjoy him. But having said that, I would say that you can never, ever, ever dismiss that in your sleep at night that God may impress something very powerfully and very forcibly upon you. The one thing I would say is that it will never be against his word.

That would be absolutely the guarantee that this was not of the Lord. If the Lord impresses things upon us during the day, of course he can impress things upon us during the night. In the very same way as our minds and all that we are are open, not only to impressions from the Lord, but also impressions from the devil. And if the devil has access to us during the night, just as during the day, of course the Lord has as well. But it will never be against his word. The word of God, of course, is

what it says, the only rule to direct us, how we may glorify and enjoy him.

So anyway, Paul in response to this vision that he had, he sets off in the Macedonian direction and he comes to Philippi. Now we all remember Philippi because of what happened there. Remember how Paul ended up in prison. Paul and Silas ended up in prison for preaching the gospel. And they had thrown an evil spirit. Remember there was this evil spirit in a young girl who was following them everywhere they went. And the owners of this girl were receiving quite a bit of money because she had this kind of ability to, I suppose, like see into the future or tell people's fortune. She was a kind of a fortune teller. And because all of a sudden they saw their social money was gone, they went to the authorities about Paul and Silas. And the long and the short of it is Paul and Silas were thrown into prison. First of all, they were beaten. They had a severe beating. And then they were put into the dungeon. Now if you saw Paul and Silas being beaten up and then thrown into the deepest dungeon in the prison, you would say to yourself, well, that's that then. And you'd say to yourself, well, I don't know what's going to happen to this gospel. There's Paul and he's absolutely persuaded this is where he's to come to. And he ends up in prison. You'd say to yourself, well, Paul, you got that one wrong.

But Paul didn't. Because one of the things that we see here is that Paul and Silas had to go into prison to reach somebody in the prison. Because God was going to deal with the prison guard, the man who was in charge in that prison, the jailer. So Paul and Silas had to go in there. And sometimes God will bring suffering and allow suffering into our lives in order for his big picture to be fulfilled. That's what happened. Paul and Silas suffered personally. But side by side with their suffering, they were given great joy. This is part of the paradox or part of the great contrast that goes on within people's lives. On the one hand, their backs are open and bleeding from the beating they had.

And yet on the other hand, we find them in the prison. They're singing. They're so full of joy. There's this exuberance that they cannot contain. They weren't singing because they had a beating.

[8 : 22] But they were singing because of the joy that the Lord had given them. It's called the joy of the Lord. It's not a natural joy. It's what we would say is supernatural. They were filled with this joy.

But of course, as we know how there was the earthquake in the prison, there had to be an earthquake. And the Philippian jailer, this man, remember, he thought that all the prisoners would have run away. And he knew what would happen to him. Even although it was not his fault to lose, a prisoner brought the sentence of death on you. And he knew that he was a dead man.

And he pulled out a sword. He was going to kill himself. Remember how Paul in the darkness shouted out to him, don't do yourself any harm. And he cried out, what must I do to be saved?

Paul said, believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and you shall be saved. All that had to happen for us to have these wonderful words written for us. Some of the best known words in the Bible, what must I do to be saved? So many people have asked that question. And the answer is there, believe in the Lord Jesus Christ and you shall be saved.

God was ordering all that for our good, for the jailer's good, for his family's good, for the beginning of the growth of the church in Philippi. And that's the way God works. Sometimes you think God's working against himself, but he's not. He's always got a plan. He's got a purpose.

[10 : 00] He's working in the right way. And so this is what happened in Philippi. But from Philippi, Paul moved on to Thessalonica. And again, we read there that it wasn't a very good start. Well, initially, in some ways, he went to the synagogue, and that was his practice. He would go to where he would have access to people in order to preach. But he wasn't there long when there was a crowd.

Some of the...we find in verse 4 in Acts chapter 17, and some of them were persuaded and joined Paul and Silas, as did a great many of the devout Greeks and not a few of the leading women. But the Jews were jealous. What an awful thing jealousy is. What a lot of trouble it brings in this world. We often said that is one of the worst sins that can lurk within our heart. The moment we're jealous of somebody, we are plotting that things will go wrong with them. And when anything will go wrong with that person, we're saying, yes, that's jealousy. You cannot look at a person favorably if you're jealous of them. If you're ever jealous of anybody, you cannot see that person in their true colors. It's like you would almost say it's jaundiced. You're looking at them through distorted eyes. And that was why Jesus went to the cross, because of envy. It tells us that in the Bible, the religious leaders were envious of them. It's a fearful thing. Well, that's what caused the problem. These...the religious leaders, they were jealous, and they took some of the wicked men, and they caused this

uproar and so on. So, Paul eventually had to leave Thessalonica. And you'd say to yourself, well, Paul, again, things aren't looking too good. Things didn't look too good for you in Philippi. And yet, when we go on a wee while later, the gospel grows in Philippi. It flourishes, and Paul writes this beautiful letter to the church in Philippi, a church that was so precious and dear to his heart. The start of things in Thessalonica don't look good either. But then we go on and we see that this church grew and flourished. And here is the apostle he's writing to this church. And it's a church, obviously, that's thrilling him as well. And Paul begins by saying to them, grace and peace. And grace and peace always go together. Grace, we've got to remember, precedes peace. I think that's very important to take note of. Grace, then peace. Because, you know, an awful lot of people are looking for peace without grace. The great movement in the 60s, a great hippie movement of peace, of promoting peace, of having peace, of world peace. Now, underneath what they were looking for was, it was very commendable. And everybody says, yes, I'm in for that. Of course, we want peace.

[13:16] We want peace as opposed to war. We want peace in our own life. We want peace within our families. We want peace within our communities. We want peace within our nation. We want peace amongst the nations of the world. Every right-thinking passion wants that. But unfortunately, it's not arrived at.

We just have to look around the world today. And the world is bubbling. It's almost like a volcano waiting to erupt. Amongst all the nations of this world. So much of evil. And so much a lack of peace.

Grace and peace. Let's not look for peace outside grace. Grace brings peace.

Peace on its own will never achieve its goal. However commendable, however worthwhile, however noble the efforts might be. And we see that even that great 60s movement, it failed. But this is the true way of finding peace is by grace. And then Paul, he says he's always thanking the Lord for this church.

And no wonder he is because the three central marks of the Christian life was evident in their life of faith and love and hope. Your work of faith. You see, they had accepted the Lord Jesus Christ as their Savior. And because Jesus was at the center of their lives, that faith affected their lives.

[15:00] Faith has to affect their lives. If we say that we have faith and our lives are not affected, then there's something wrong. Now, that doesn't mean that every single moment of our entire existence that we are living in a God-glorifying, Christ-honoring way. But it means that the main thrust of our life is towards God is towards God and towards the things of God and seeking to implement what His Word says in our life. Of course we fail. And when we fail, we're sorry because we fail. And we go to the Lord and we ask for forgiveness. But you see, the great thing about faith is faith brings things that we cannot naturally see. It gives them substance so that it's as if it was actually there really beside you.

It's in front of you. Faith is a substance. That's what the Bible says. Faith is a substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen. There's the evidence. Substance. Evidence. And yet you can't see it.

That's what faith is like. Today, if you believe in Jesus Christ, you're able to see by faith. It's a reality. You know the reality of your faith. You know who you belong to. And nobody can take that away from you. You cannot see God. You see His handiwork in the creation. You see the Word that He has before you. But you don't see Him as such. You cannot see Jesus with the actual eye, but you see Him by faith.

And He's real. His Word is real. Your faith in what is yet to come. Today, you believe Jesus is coming again into this world. You believe in His second coming. It's as real to you as if it had actually taken place. You are persuaded of it. That is faith. It's exactly the same kind of faith as Abraham had about Jesus' first coming. Remember how Jesus said, Abraham saw my day and rejoiced.

In other words, Abraham, by faith, was seeing that Jesus was coming into the world as a Savior. Today, you by faith are persuaded that Jesus the Savior is coming back as judge. See, this is what faith does. It gives substance to what you cannot actually see. But it's real. It's there. You're persuaded of it. And so faith affects our lives. It has to. But not only was there great faith, it's been shown, it was this labor of love. Love characterized their life. They were busy serving one another. That's what faith does. And that's, it works. And love, they're all tied together. In fact, even our faith, we're told, worketh by love. But this love that was in the hearts of the church in Thessalonica meant

that they were serving. They were serving one another.

[18 : 33] That's what love does. Love doesn't, and the beauty about love is that love serves in the summer as well as in the winter times. Love serves those that they love, and love serves those that maybe they might find it harder to love. Love doesn't say, do I like this person or do I not like this person? Love does.

And that's a great and a wonderful thing. So there was a church full of love and also steadfastness of hope. And as we know, the Christian hope is a hope that is assured and persuaded. Our hope is in Jesus. In fact, we're told in Hebrews about our hope that it is like an anchor. We have this as a sure and steadfast anchor of the soul, a hope that enters into the inner place. That's what Christian hope is like. It's rooted in Jesus. Normally, we've said this often enough, in life, we often use the word hope. And we say, well, I hope to go tomorrow. I hope to go to such and such a place. Next year, I'm hoping to go. I'm hoping this. I'm hoping that. I'm hoping to do this. And we intend to do it as long as everything keeps going the way we expect. But we have no absolute guarantee. Because what we're hoping to do, circumstances may so change that we can no longer do what we hope to do. So natural hope is often disappointed. And the Bible actually tells us that. But hope in Jesus is different. Because that's a hope that's guaranteed.

[20 : 26] And everything that you hope for today, in Christ, it will be fulfilled. So there was this, and you know, that gives you a steadfastness in life. When you have this absolute persuasion that it's going to be as it says it's going to be. And then we're, time's going, just move very briefly through this. For we know, brothers, loved by God that He has chosen you.

Now again, you come to a big area here, and people will say straight away, oh, well, this seems quite a strange thing, that God is choosing. Well, we can say that those whom God chooses, He changes. And we're told here, loved by God, and He has chosen you. Some people may ask, which comes first, which comes first? Is it the loving, or is it the choosing? Does God choose us in order to love us? Or does He love us first and then choose us? Does He love us and then He chooses us because He loves us? Well, I heard one old man say it this way, and he put it by his own marriage. And he said, he said that he thought that God loved first. And because He loved, He chose. And he put it down to his own marriage. And he said, he said, I loved Mary. And because I loved Mary, I chose her as my wife. Now again, that's the way he saw it. It's something people debate. Some say one thing, and some say another. But the great thing is here that the love and the choosing are all intertwined.

And it's a wonderful thing. This is what we term as God's electing love. And there's three things we'd say about it. One, it is immutable. A second thing we'd say it's unconditional. And a third thing we say it's irresistible. What do we mean? Well, when we say it's immutable, it means it is absolutely certain. God cannot change His mind. That's what it's saying. This love, this loving choice, is such that God isn't going to say, right, I love you for a while.

I love you. No, I've changed my mind. I want to love somebody else. God doesn't do that. It is our love that is absolutely fixed. It is unconditional. That means it's not dependent upon ourselves. God doesn't love us because He sees some kind of goodness and says, well, I want to love Him. I'm going to love her. I'm going to love this person because I see. No. He loves us warts and all.

[23 : 23] Sin and all. He has seen our life all the way through from end to beginning, however long our life is. Every single day of our life before ever we existed, He knew everything about it. And at no point did He say, oh, well, look at all these sin. Look at how His life is going to turn out. I cannot love Him. No.

He loves us despite what we are with this unchanging love. While we were yet enemies. Isn't that extraordinary? While we were enemies, Christ died for us. Not when we were His friends. Not when we loved Him. But when we were against Him. When we were opposed to Him. We were against Him. We were against Him. We were against Him. We were against Him. We were against Him.

And it's irresistible. And it's irresistible. We talk about one person. We talk about it in love. About, we use it, I don't know how often it's used now, but it certainly was a word that was often used about somebody wooing a person. Where they were able to, supposing a man or a woman, or vice versa.

But there was somebody who was by His way, was able to charm, able to appeal to the affections of another, and eventually draw them so that there was this drawing together. Well, God does that irresistibly to us. He woos us by His love. And He's not going to take no for an answer.

[24 : 58] He breaks down the oppositions. And this church is full today, as churches all over are full of people who once hated God. They were enemies of God. But God in that love came, and He broke down the barriers. He broke down the opposition. And my friend, do you know the wonderful thing is this?

This is what I love, what it says here. For we know, brothers loved by God, that He has chosen you. Why? Because our gospel came to you in word, but also in power and the Spirit. This is a great thing. We know that God loves us because He's brought the gospel. And that's what He's done for you today. So you can't turn around and say, oh, I don't know if I'm loved or chosen by God. He has brought you the gospel. That's what He did to the church, what the people in Thessalonica. He brought the gospel into the city because of His loving and His choosing, and lives were being changed all the time. And today, this is where you are. There are parts of the world that might not be happening, but for you, it is happening here today.

And that's the most wonderful thing. Is it not showing that God is for you rather than against you? And this word election, as we say, or choosing, people say, oh, well, if God's going to choose, what? But, you know, God never, ever, ever, that whole area, some people say we shouldn't even mention the word of choosing. And so, well, I don't believe that at all. The one thing, do you know what God says? The only thing that God says to us about it, about election or choosing, is you make sure that you are? He puts a responsibility upon us. You make your calling and your election sure. You make it sure. How do you make it sure? By sitting back doing nothing. No, that's not making sure.

Making sure is by seeking, by searching. You say to the Lord, Lord, in your wisdom and in your love, you have set me where the gospel is. That surely shows your interest, your care, your love, your concern for me. And so, it's into this environment that we seek, that we search.

And if we do, we'll find. And then finally, we see very briefly that the word, that the, for we know, brothers loved by God, that he has chosen you because our gospel came to you, not only in word, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit. This is what changes people's lives, the word, the word of God. Now, the word of God in and of itself can be read, and it can go and not affect somebody's life. And I'm sure there's many of you in here, you spent years reading the Bible, and it didn't really do anything for you.

[28 : 05] And it came to a point, maybe for some of you that you closed and you said, well, it's a very interesting book, it's very challenging, and I would agree with a lot that's in it. But it didn't really make any great impact on your life. But that changes when the Holy Spirit comes in power, because this word becomes real, it becomes life. The authority of God speaks out of it.

It touches into your heart, begins to convict you, and say, hey, as you read the word, you realize, oh, I always knew I wasn't perfect, but I didn't realize I was a sinner before God.

That's what the word does. When the word comes in power, it convicts and convinces us. But it doesn't stop there, because when the word comes in power on the Spirit, the Spirit, we're told in the Bible, convinces us of sin and of righteousness and of judgment. But Jesus also said that the Spirit's great work was also to reveal Him. So that's what the Holy Spirit does. When the Spirit comes in power, the word comes alive, where we're brought to see ourselves, but more importantly, we're brought to see Him. I pray today that that's what we'll see, that we'll see ourselves as we really are, but we will see Him as He really is, as the great Savior of sinners. And just as the church in the early days, St. Paul under Paul's preaching, it became alive and vibrant, and this church was every day looking for the return of Jesus. Wouldn't it be wonderful if that is how our lives were marked and changed, as we embrace Jesus as our Lord and Savior? Let's pray. Lord, our God, we give thanks for this word, this word, this word that is able to change, able to make us wise and to salvation. May we hear, may our souls live, and may we rejoice in the Lord. Bless us all, we pray. Take us all home safely, do us good, and forgive us our sins. In Jesus' name, amen.